

A common thread

Autumn 2007 will see the opening of one of Historic Scotland's most ambitious projects in recent years – a £5m visitor centre within the former complex of cotton mills at Stanley, near Perth. Jim Broughton, interpretation manager for presentation and displays, describes the extent of community involvement in developing displays for the site, which has been unprecedented for Historic Scotland, most of whose properties date to the medieval period or earlier.

Cotton spinning at Stanley began in 1787. At its height, the enterprise employed almost 2,000 people, most of whom lived in a planned village that is still home to dozens of former workers.

The mills closed in 1989, but in 1995 a partnership of Historic Scotland and the Phoenix Trust, with major support from the Heritage Lottery Fund, saved the site from demolition. Since Stanley Mills is too vast a complex to be sustainable as a visitor attraction alone, the plan has been for a mixed-use development, including housing, offices, leisure and light industry.

Defining the 'community' to be involved in the project was no simple task – was it the village, the new residents or the diaspora of former workers, many of whom had retired long before the closure of the factory? The answer of course was all of these groups – and the task was to enthuse everyone to share their knowledge, memories and perceptions of the site.

Initially the curiosity factor proved a large asset. With so much building activity after six years of dereliction, events held in Arkwright's spectacular Bell Mill during Scottish Archaeology Month and on a Doors Open Day were enormously well attended, turning into veritable Antiques Roadshows as people brought along their own photographs and mementoes, and in many cases met up with former colleagues they had not seen for years.

This social aspect of the project was helped by a close working relationship with the local history society, whose president happens to be a resident of one of the new townhouses! A core network of contacts was soon established, including 14 former mill workers who were happy to participate in an oral history project. In 2005 Historic Scotland contracted Dr Emma Robertson, a researcher at Loughborough University specialising in workplace culture, to record almost 20 hours of interviews. Transcriptions and recordings of these will feature heavily throughout the new interpretation scheme.

Historic Scotland has generated much local goodwill in developing Stanley Mills, the result of more than a decade of groundwork – particularly on the part of the conservation and maintenance team that has steadily managed the site's restoration. Through attending community meetings, school presentations and even arranging

the village's carol service, the team has created an open and inclusive climate in which interpretation planning was simply one more stage in the process of the mills' resurrection.

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'None of us is as smart as all of us'

Japanese proverb